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Buffalo-Niagara LGBTQ History Project Minutes

The Madeline Davis Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual,
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December 2018; Buffalo-Niagara LGBTQ History Project Minutes

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Buffalo -Niagara LGBTQ History Project

Dec. 12, 2018

Dramatis Personae: Adrienne, Megan, Catherine, Brandon, Bridge, Marta, Gena, Cynthia, Michael, Jeff, Dean, Ben, Carol, Lydia, Ryan, Jos, Amanda, Ana

Makin' It Official

Adrienne opened the meeting by announcing that Ana and she are working with Heidi Jones, local attorney, co-owner of The Intersection Cafe, and all-around amazing member of the LGBTQ community, to procure incorporation papers and 501c3 status for the History Project. We want to do this because it will help us protect our name, and because it will help us raise funds for our increasingly ambitious programming by allowing us to open a bank account, receive tax-exempt donations, and access a larger variety of grants than are currently available to us.

Part of the process of becoming a 501c3 is creating a board. This, too, is a good thing: it will help us become more accountable to the community whose history we are covering. It will also help us gain access to communities and institutions we have had limited access to in the past, and if done right, the board will help us raise funds. In addition to assembling a board, the group will need to create bylaws.

Adrienne asked the group if any members were interested in assisting with the process of procuring a 501c3. Amanda, Bridge, Jos, Gena, Michael, Ben, and Lydia all expressed interest. Adrienne will contact all interested members shortly.

Rebranding the History Project

Amanda presented a brief report on her plans to rebrand the History Project. Thanks to Amanda, our posters for our 2018 events have been beautiful, but some of our basic visual stuff --our logo in particular--need a serious update. In addition, Amanda wants to take on the task of creating annual reports for the History Project. The reports would be particularly helpful for fundraising and grant writing purposes.

We briefly talked about the possibility of getting the board, once it is formed, involved in the process of choosing design types for the History Project. In the meantime, though, Amanda is going to develop three possible designs for the History Project's visual language. She will present them at the January meeting, and we will decide which one we like best.

Archiving our 2018 Materials

Amanda went on to say that she wants to take on the task of making sure copies of all our 2018 materials make it to the Madeline Davis Archives at Buff State. She has already reached out to Dan DiLandro in the archives to find out what the process of archiving materials might be, but she needs the group's help ensuring that as many materials as possible--posters, programs, notes, pictures, and other materials--make it into the archive.

If you have any digital materials commemorating History Project events in 2018--poster designs, press releases, photos, etc.--please email them to bfolgbtqhistory@gmail.com by Jan. 1, 2019. If you have physical materials, please plan to bring them to our next meeting, so that Amanda can pass them on to the Madeline Davis Archives.

Carol Speser's Photo Reconstruction Project

Carol Speser then gave a presentation on a project that she is starting, and on which she would like us to collaborate. Carol has a number of photos that she took of Buffalo's 1994 Pride March, many of which are close-ups of people. Since 2019 will be the 25-year anniversary of that march, she would like to commemorate it.

Here is Carol's idea: she would like to have an exhibit--ideally in City Hall, on the 13th floor, where it will display outside the Common Council chambers. This might open the project up to Common Council funds, and it will have the added bonus of making Common Council members confront Buffalo's queer history every time they walk down the hall. Carol would like to not only show her photos from 1994, but also to gather the people who appear in those photos, and to photograph them again, re-creating each photo from her collection in the present day. These photos would be a meditation on how the Buffalo LGBTQ community has both endured and changed over the last 25 years. Carol would also like to pair these photos with some sort of narrative--either written excerpts from interviews, audio interviews, or maybe some sort of panel discussion.

Members of the History Project had the following questions or comments for Carol:

- *Amanda:*Thinks this is a fantastic idea. Has Carol thought about working with any known LGBTQ photographers or artists? Amanda knows some artists, and could help pair Carol up.
- *Amanda:*Does Carol want the narrative portion of the project to be live or pre-recorded?
- *Bridge:*Given the balmy summer day that is portrayed in Carol's original photographs, would Carol want to wait until spring to take the new photos?
 - *Carol:*Probably, but wants to start publicizing and gathering participants for the project now.

- *Jeff*: How does Carol want to represent people who were in the original pictures, but who have moved and/or passed away? Should we create a graphic for that?
- *Adrienne*: What role does Carol envision the History Project playing in this collaboration?
 - *Carol*: Isn't sure yet. Maybe wants to find out whether people are willing to get their picture taken for this project before we hash out the details of the collaboration.
- *Brandon*: Expressed concern that people who had their pictures taken in 1994 might not be comfortable appearing in an exhibit 25 years later.
 - *Carol*: Doesn't think people have a choice about that, as these are photos of a public event.
- *Michael*: Likes the idea of the project; doesn't agree with other members of the group that we necessarily need to wait for a nice day to take the new photos.
- *Ben*: Could this be worked into a fundraising event?

In general, the group agreed that we wanted to collaborate with Carol on this project. Between now and the January meeting, Carol will contact the people who appear in her original photos, and ask if they are willing to recreate their original photos. She will report back to us in January, and we will make a plan from there.

2019 Programming

And now for the main event: planning the History Project's 2019 Programming! Adrienne began by passing out the results of our survey, asking people to weigh in on what programming they wanted to cover. (*See Appendix for a copy of that survey.*)

Adrienne then noted that, although we're aiming for about 4 events over the course of the year, she did not just give the top 4 results. This is for a couple of reasons: first, because the most popular comment in response to the survey was that we should consider combining some of the ideas into single events, so we should consider whether and how we might combine some of the most popular ideas. Second, popularity is not the single most important consideration in choosing programming. We should choose a mix of programming that makes sense at different times of the year, and mix events that require more research with events that require less research.

This led to some discussion about how we should choose our programming. Some highlights were as follows:

- There was some discussion on how to combine ideas. Lydia, for instance, proposed the idea of combining some research on Native America, Jewish, and possibly trans masculine history into a single event on marginalized queer identities. Other

members of the group, however, did not agree with this. Ben, who is working on a project having to do with local Jewish LGBTQ identities, cautioned that grouping together multiple marginalized identities ran the risk of reinscribing their marginality. Amanda also pointed out that an identity is not an event, and that we should choose our programming not just on themes, but on the kinds of events we want to, or think we could, create.

- Catherine asked the group about the level of research we have completed for each proposed project. Which projects have we already completed, and which would we need to begin from scratch? Adrienne, Ana, and Ben responded in the following ways:
 - Ben is already planning to host an event on LGBTQ Jewish identity in April or May. No real research has been done, per se, but the foundations for the project have already been laid.
 - An event on how Stonewall did and didn't change Buffalo would rely a lot on the Mattachine Society of the Niagara Frontier archives. Those are available at the Madeline Davis Archives, and a near-complete set of the MSNF magazine, *Fifth Freedom*, is available online. In addition, Jeff has already completed some research on MSNF.
 - Cory is already working on an interactive map, based on our 2018 programming. The creation of an interactive map is a good idea, but it doesn't need to be a discrete project: it can be an ongoing project that we complete as we complete different research projects.
 - There are photos of pets in the Madeline Davis Archives, and we believe that the "Queers and Their Pets" event can be completed fairly easily.
 - Not much research has been completed on trans masculinity in Buffalo, but we at least know where to start. There has been a fair amount of research completed on Harry Gorman, a trans man who lived in Buffalo at the turn of the 20th century. *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold* mentions "passing women"--people who were assigned female at birth but who lived as men in the 1940s and 1950s, either to get better economic opportunities, or in order to live according to their felt gender identity. And, of course, we can do some research into the history behind Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues*.
 - Taking over a parking lot should be pretty easy. We did the research during *She Walked Here* so we already know which presentday commercial parking lots used to be gay bars. The major issue with this project is bureaucratic red tape, but Cory may be in the process of figuring out how to address that.
 - The same is true of getting a historic plaque put up. Cory and Christy have some info about making that happen, and we know some historic sites. Adrienne would personally like to commemorate Ralph Martin's--not just

because it was the most popular gay bar in the region during the 1940s, but also because she wants to get a historic plaque put up in front of Coca-Cola Field, declaring that it used to be a gay bar.

- Amanda suggests that we think more about our target audience(s) for events. In particular, she suggests targeting youth or seniors for our programming.
- Dean points out that there's typically a focus on drinking during LGBTQ events, and that this can suck for sober people. We should make sure we are creating programming that is appealing to people who don't drink, or that doesn't necessarily place a premium on drinking.
- Amanda wonders if all of our research projects have to result in events. Perhaps we could work toward something else—an article, a formal research project, etc.
- Michael asks if all projects need to be undertaken by the entire group. For instance, if we wanted to work toward creating a chronology of local LGBTQ history, that could primarily be undertaken by one or two people.

Based on these discussions, we have decided on the following programming for 2019:

Queers and their pets (February-March). We chose this event for many reasons: because it will be a spot of brightness in the midst of dreary winter; because it will require less research than some of our other programming, and because it can also function as a fundraiser and a kickoff event where we introduce the rest of our programming for 2019. We are also interested in potentially partnering with Buckminster's Cat Cafe if it opens in time, or potentially asking a local animal rescue to bring adoptable cats and dogs.

Although this is meant to be a relatively light event, we also think there are a lot of ways we can use human-animal relations as a lens to look at local LGBTQ history. Members are interested in looking at the queerness of people's relationships to their pets--and Catherine says that this is one of her partner's primary research interests, so she could play a role. Carol mentioned that during the height of the AIDS epidemic, there was a cadre of Buffalonians that took care of sick people's pets, and who rehomed those pets after they died. We're interested in looking at pets as part of a queer family, as queer people's first source of unconditional love after they have been rejected by their families of origin, and about the role that pets' emotional support plays in upholding social justice activism by queers.

Stonewall remembrance week (June). In the 1970s and 1980s, the Mattachine Society of the Niagara Frontier, Buffalo's LGBTQ activist association, would put together a week of multiple events, commemorating Pride. Since one of the History Project's major interests for 2019 is exploring how Stonewall did and did not affect the course of local LGBTQ history, and since a lot of that research will focus on the MSNF, it makes sense to host a week of events.

Ideally, this week will combine a number of events. We'd like to aim for a historical plaque, and see it go up during this week. We'd like to include our collaboration with Carol in this week. We'd like to host an educational event that discusses the influence of Stonewall on local activism (and Jeff tells us that former MSNF members have conflicting views on this point, so it should be an interesting discussion), and/or to record oral histories that focus on this question. We'd also like to have a party on a parking lot, though there is some concern that this will require a police presence. Nevertheless, we will at least look into the possibility. Other possible ideas: party at Coca-Cola field; party at a vacant lot that used to house a bar; marching to the party.

We are aiming for the last week of June to hold these events, so that they'll coincide with the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall riots. Bonus: the state of New York has money available to fund events commemorating Stonewall, and no one in Buffalo has applied for these funds yet. Michael has also suggested that we make some of our research in this area into a curriculum that we could take to local schools.

Project TBD (October). The group expressed interest in pursuing one of two projects: either a project on trans masculinity, or a project on the history of the psychiatric treatment of LGBTQ Buffalonians. Here is our analysis of what each project might entail at this point:

Trans Masculinity	Psychiatric Treatment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tying actual local histories to the fictitious histories of <i>Stone Butch Blues</i>. • Learning about how trans people's self-conception has changed over time. • Important to remember that "trans masculinity" includes butch trans women, not just trans men. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is a local group, Madwomen in the Attic, that is concerned with psychiatric treatment as a source of oppression, and whose founder is a queer woman. They would be a logical partner for this project. • The Hotel Henry/former asylum would be a logical focal point for this project. • Catherine has spent some time looking into what it would mean to conduct research on psychiatric treatment. There are confidentiality concerns, and New York State has guidelines for historic research. We may need to look into this more, and we may need academic and/or medical credentials. • Research on mental health concerns overlaps with our research on MSNF, because MSNF did research and education on mental health concerns/psychiatric oppression of

	LGBTQ people.
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At this point, we have decided to just conduct some preliminary research on both topics, including what obstacles exist to studying both, and reconvene in a month or two to make a decision on how to proceed. We also have decided not to commit ourselves to an end project just yet, particularly in light of some members' suggestion that not every research project must culminate in an event. We will hopefully let the research lead us to an end product. We do know that whatever project we decide to pursue, we want to roll it out in October, which is LGBTQ History Month.

Documentary Project (end of year): We are also committing ourselves to finishing one of the documentary projects we've begun by the end of 2019—in all likelihood, on Buffalo's ballroom scene. Ana reported that the History Project presented a teaser at Squeaky Wheel's *Shakedown* screening earlier in the month based on interviews we've already conducted. It was received well, and now more people expect a film from us.

Equally importantly, Ebony Johnson was at the screening, and she enjoyed seeing some of her footage on the big screen. Next year marks the 20th anniversary of Ebony founding Buffalo's ballroom scene, and she is potentially interested in collaborating with us on a commemorative event. She really liked the Varsity Theatre on Bailey Avenue where *Shakedown* was screened, and talked about the possibility of hosting an event there that starts with a documentary screening, and then becomes a ball hosted by Ebony.

We now have 3 filmmakers willing to work on the project, but we still need more History Project members to participate. In particular, we need people to conduct background research, reach out to potential interviewees, interview people, and edit video footage.

Next Steps

Our programming plans for next year are ambitious, and in order to complete them, we will need to take a different approach from that we have taken in past years. We can no longer afford to approach our programming one project at a time. We need to begin working on all four projects at the beginning of the year. Fortunately, we have a bigger and more dedicated membership this year than we have ever had before.

In order to get our programming off the ground, we will need to divide into taskforces. These taskforces will focus on a single project, and will need to commit to meeting between our monthly meetings. Monthly meetings will be largely dedicated to each taskforce reporting on their progress.

To facilitate this, Adrienne will create a spreadsheet where people can sign up to participate in the taskforce(s) that interest them most. Because there has been some confusion about this, we need to clarify: **people can participate in more than one taskforce.** The purpose of

the sign-up spreadsheet isn't to force people to choose a single project, but to clarify who is responsible for what.

Appendix: 2019 Programming Survey Results

Total Votes: 27

Project already chosen for 2019: Finish and screen a documentary.

13 votes:

- Reclaim a commercial parking lot that used to be a gay bar site.

12 votes:

- Celebrate the 50th anniversary of Stonewall by creating an event that explores how Stonewall did and didn't change LGBTQ activism in Buffalo.

11 votes:

- History of trans masculinity in Buffalo.

10 votes:

- Develop interactive maps of local LGBTQ history.

8 votes:

- Project on queer Jewish history (April/May)
- History of medical treatment of local LGBTQ people.
- Archive drive.

7 votes:

- History of local Native American identities/communities.
- Develop a chronology of Buffalo's LGBTQ history.
- Queers and their pets event.

6 votes:

- Tour series.
- Party celebrating 50th anniversary of Stonewall.
- Regional Rust Belt queer conference.
- History of drag bars/cabarets on Bailey Avenue.
- Either put a building on the list of historic preservation sites, or have a plaque built.